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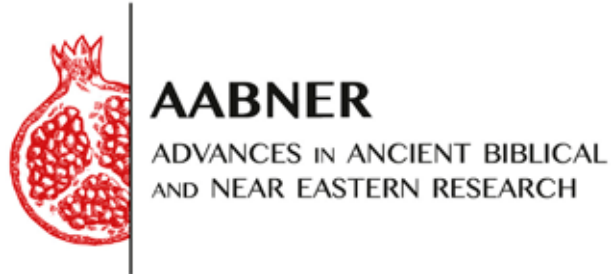
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# THE MASORETES, THE QUR'ĀN, AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

***Jillian Stinchcomb***

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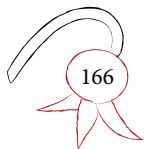
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## Abstract

It is broadly accepted that the Qur'ān is a part of biblical tradition because it invokes biblical figures and narratives in ways similar to late antique biblical interpretation seen in contemporaneous Jewish and Christian communities. Because the Qur'ān postdates both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, relatively little attention has been paid to how it has influenced or shaped biblical tradition. This article argues that the Qur'ān is an integral part of biblical tradition not only because of its influence on perceptions of the biblical past, but because the material form of the Masoretic Text (the Hebrew Bible most used today) with Tiberian pointing and in codex form, is one that is informed by a post-qur'ānic context.



È ampiamente accettato che il Corano faccia parte della tradizione biblica, poiché richiama figure e narrazioni bibliche in modi simili all'interpretazione biblica tardoantica presente nelle contemporanee comunità ebraiche e cristiane. Poiché il Corano è di poco posteriore sia al Nuovo Testamento sia alla Bibbia ebraica, è stata dedicata relativamente scarsa attenzione a come il Corano abbia influenzato o plasmato la tradizione biblica. Questo articolo sostiene che il Corano sia parte integrante della tradizione biblica non solo per la sua influenza sulle percezioni del passato biblico, ma anche perché la forma materiale del Testo Masoretico, (la versione della Bibbia ebraica oggi più utilizzata), con la vocalizzazione tiberiense e in forma di codice, è il prodotto di un contesto post-coranico.



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## THE MASORETES, THE QUR'ĀN, AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

*Jillian Stinchcomb*



### Introduction

Any well-rounded discussion of the inheritance of biblical tradition must include the Qur'ān. The text shows a deep knowledge of biblical traditions in its invocation of characters, narratives, and motifs taken from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For example, Surah al-Baqara, the second and longest surah of the Qur'ān, offers an extended reflection on the narrative of the Israelites making and worshipping the Golden Calf in Exodus 32 while Moses communed with God on Sinai.<sup>1</sup> Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Jesus, and other biblical figures appear in the Qur'ān, often through terse references that assume the audience knows the figures intimately and does not need further introduction to them. The potential for comparison is plentiful and obvious, and there is a rich body of literature for both specialists and

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive work on the biblical engagement of Surah al-Baqara is Pregill 2020.

general audiences on the biblical resonances found in qur'ānic literature.<sup>2</sup> For obvious chronological reasons—primarily the fact that the Bible predates the Qur'ān—it is far less common to find discussion of the Qur'ān's influence on the Bible. Yet, since what we think of as the “Hebrew Bible,” in terms of its form and structure, actually continued to take shape after the emergence of the Qur'ān, it is also possible to think about influence from the other direction. This article contends that although the Bible predates the Qur'ān and influenced it, it was also influenced by the Qur'ān.

Though the consonantal frame of the Hebrew Bible (and thus the overwhelming majority of its semantic content) stabilized before the rise of Islam, the material form of the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew version of the biblical text most widely read today, developed toward the end of the first millennium of the Common Era and reflects contemporaneous Muslim discourses about the writing and form of the Qur'ān whose influence persists to the modern period. This argument underscores the need for a dynamic model of tradition inheritance that reflects sometimes-surprising, even counterintuitive, relationships of influence, as even the most stable of traditions are subject to change in material transmission and interpretation over time.

Too much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholarship on the relationship between the Qur'ān and the Bible treated the Qur'ān as an inferior or deficient imitator of biblical texts. More recent scholarship has shown that the Qur'ān is best understood as a part of a late antique and early medieval landscape of literary production. This line of scholarship puts the Qur'ān and early Muslim exegesis in conversation with contemporaneous Jewish and Christian literature, especially



<sup>2</sup> Recent examples of general treatments include Peters 2007; Reynolds 2010; Gregg 2015; Durie 2018; Kaltner and Mirza 2018; Whittingham 2021; Zellentin 2022. In his introduction to the Qur'ān, Nicolai Sinai (2017) devotes chapter 6 to the resonances between biblical and qur'ānic literature. Discussions of specific motifs and themes between qur'ānic and biblical literature include Cuypers 2007 (on the rhetorical history underpinning Surah al-Ma'ida); Abboud 2014 (on Mary); Penchansky 2021 (on Solomon); Galadari 2022 (on death and resurrection); Tottoli 2022 (on prophets).

rabbinic Jewish and Syriac Christian sources. Scholars like John C. Reeves, Gabriel Said Reynolds, Reyhan Durmaz, Jeffrey Einboden, and Miriam Hjälm have produced scholarship that focuses on the Bible's influence on the Qurʾān, the Qurʾān's resonances with biblical past, or Qurʾānic influence on folktales and the inheritance of biblical literature.<sup>3</sup> This body of scholarship treats the Qurʾān in its historical context and recognizes inter-religious dialogue and influence, focusing especially on medieval or later traditions that developed after the Qurʾān. I want to highlight their relevance and expand upon this literature by suggesting that biblical scholars in particular should be cognizant of the Qurʾān's influence on the Bible as an inflection point in the development of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. The Masoretic Text is based on a tradition that developed before the emergence of the Qurʾān but was itself a product of a Jewish community living in an Islamicate milieu. Thus, I argue that the Qurʾān is not just an inheritor of biblical tradition, but it is also a co-producer of biblical tradition by virtue of its impact on the material form of the Masoretic Text.



The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible is by far the most widely read form of the Hebrew Bible; it is found in Hebrew editions of the Bible the world over and forms the basis of what students of Biblical Hebrew learn in their grammars and textbooks.<sup>4</sup> The Masoretes are less known, however, than the textual tradition that bears their name. They are a group of Jewish scribes who lived at the end of the first millennium of the Common era. They are responsible for the vowels attached to the consonantal frame of Biblical Hebrew, the versification and paragraph divisions of the text, and the codicological layout of the text, among other features (Khan 2020b, 3). What this means is that

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<sup>3</sup> Reeves 2003a; Reeves 2003b; Reynolds 2018; Einboden 2019; Durmaz 2022; Hjälm 2023.

<sup>4</sup> It is also the text against which ancient manuscripts are read. This is most notable in the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which predate the Masoretes by centuries, but are judged according to their fidelity, or lack thereof, to the Masoretic tradition. For a comparative textual-critical discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Masoretic Text, see Tov 2022, esp. chapter 22, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Textual History of the Masoretic Bible.”

the Masoretic tradition indeed developed in an Islamicate context over the last two or three centuries of the first millennium CE (Khan 2020a, 16). Two aspects of the Masoretes' work receive special attention in my argument: (1) their efforts to textualize the oral tradition of pronunciation of the Bible and (2) their use of the codex. Both the inclusion of vowel markers and the decision to use a codex instead of a scroll reflect post-qur'ānic discourses of text and tradition. The Qur'ān and concerns about its proper preservation and pronunciation had a direct effect on the material form of the Hebrew Bible.

In order to make my case, I first describe in detail the achievements of current "Bible and Qur'ān" scholarship and the significance of the historiographical intervention that insists on the "co-production" of biblical tradition. Next, I explicate the history of the finalization of the Qur'ān, paying special attention to the early debates about the proper pronunciation of the consonantal frame of the qur'ānic text. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the Masoretic Text, what we know of the social context of its production, and the results of the labor of the Masoretes. The history of the development of the Masoretic Text was shaped by earlier and contemporaneous Muslim discourses of textual fixity in relation to oral tradition. This history suggests that the material form of the Masoretic Text developed as a response to Muslim discourses on the perfection of the Qur'ān, and that the Qur'ān itself should be seen as an agent in the development of biblical tradition.



## Bible and Qur'ān, Co-Production and Inheritance

Academic scholarship on the Bible and the Qur'ān has a long history. One of the foundational essays in the Western academic study of Islam is Abraham Geiger's (1833) *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume Aufgenommen?*, an essay that explores Muhammad's "borrowings" and influences from Judaism in general and from the Bible in particular. Geiger was not the first to explore these connections, as Muslim scholars have been producing literature on biblical traditions, called "Isrā'īliyāt

literature,” for over a millennium.<sup>5</sup> Geiger’s work was new in the context of Western scholarship, though. As Michael Pregill has highlighted, this line of scholarship utilizes similar tools and questions as classical Muslim scholarship, which explains the biblical background essential to understanding a range of qurʾānic texts (Pregill 2020, 265–317). Many have followed where Geiger led. There is a long line of studies that make similar arguments, such as Israel Schapiro’s (1907) *Die haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans* and Shelomo Dov Goitein’s (1958) “Muhammed’s Inspiration by Judaism.”<sup>6</sup> The tenor of nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies of this type varies. Geiger, notably, considered the Qurʾān to have been produced by Muhammad, rather than to have been of divine origin, but also considered Muhammad to be a sincerely religious figure—a markedly more positive vision than that shared by many of his Jewish and Christian contemporaries or even those who wrote after him.<sup>7</sup> This body of work emphasized the importance of Christianity (as well as Judaism) to the early formation of Islam and explored case studies to understand qurʾānic engagement with biblical texts and biblical traditions. This is the background against which modern Qurʾān and Bible studies emerged.

In the twenty-first century, there has been a concerted effort by scholars to avoid reinscribing the sense that the Qurʾān is an “imperfect



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<sup>5</sup> One useful discussion of this history is found in Reeves 2003a, especially vii–viii.

<sup>6</sup> Other examples include Hirschfeld 1878; Lidzbarski 1893; Rudolph 1922; Horowitz 1925; Andrae 1926, Bell 1926; Bell 1934; Heller 1934; Jeffery 1938; Moubarac 1958; Parrinder 1965.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Geiger and his intellectual context, see Heschel 1998. See also Firestone 2003, esp. 9–11, for a helpful review of the literature. In the same volume, Robbins and Newby describe how later scholars interpreted the Qurʾān and Bible in light of Geiger’s insights, stating that “subsequent Western scholarship in this vein came to regard the Qurʾān as somehow inferior to antecedent scripture precisely because it was derivative, and considerable effort was spent explicitly or implicitly attempting to demonstrate that the biblical ideas and figures in the Qurʾān were ‘borrowed’ from Judaism or Christianity” (25). The works discussed by Victor Robbins and Gordon Newby, although not exemplary of generous or irenic reading practices, nonetheless established a range of ways to understand the Qurʾān and its relationship to the Bible.



imitator” of the Hebrew Bible. Angelika Neuwirth (2010), one of the most important contemporary qur’ānic scholars, has written extensively about the Qur’ān in its late antique cultural milieu.<sup>8</sup> Under this framework, the Qur’ān is an example of an *interpretation* of biblical tradition, rather than a perversion or distortion of it. Within the context of late antiquity, the interpretations of biblical tradition that are contained within the Qur’ān conform to contemporaneous practices, especially when compared to, for example, contemporaneous Syriac literature.<sup>9</sup> Reynolds’s *The Qur’ān and Bible: Text and Commentary* highlights what he argues are the intrinsic connections between the scriptural traditions of the Qur’ān, New Testament, and Tanakh (Reynolds 2018). This work is written for popular audiences as well as academic specialists, but it is notable for how it normalizes qur’ānic biblical interpretation as a feature of scripture not dissimilar to how the New Testament interprets texts from the Hebrew Bible and to how texts within the Hebrew Bible sometimes interpret other parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Within the field of Biblical Studies, the Qur’ān is generally examined in two ways. The first way is represented by the 2003 SBL Press volume edited by Reeves called *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*.<sup>10</sup> This volume emerged in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks when interest in the relationship between the Bible and the Qur’ān was piqued among biblical scholars. Reeves’s volume focuses on the “textual and exegetical interfaces among the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions” (2003a, ix) and also offers several useful accounts of the longer historiography of studies of the Qur’ān and the Bible. The volume offers a glimpse of what were considered possible lines of inquiry about the interconnections between the Bible and the Qur’ān and their relevance to the audience of SBL Press in the early twenty-first



<sup>8</sup> This volume was translated in Neuwirth 2019. See also Neuwirth et al. 2010.

<sup>9</sup> There are moments where the Qur’ān offers a new theology or ideology that diverges from biblical materials—as, for example, in Surah 55’s remodeling of Psalm 136—but this is presented as a theologically valid interpretive choice rather than a nefarious or ignorant misreading of the biblical text (Neuwirth 2008, 1–20).

<sup>10</sup> The volume in its context and its relationship to the literary study of the Qur’ān are usefully discussed in Zadeh 2015.

century. It is a useful entry point into the study of the subfield and is cited by authorities in the field of Islamic Studies like Sidney Griffith, Walid Saleh, and David Powers in their exploration of the Bible and its impact on qurʾānic discourses.<sup>11</sup> In his contribution to the volume, Reeves makes a cogent case for the Qurʾān and post-qurʾānic Muslim literature as repositories of late antique tradition which can offer insights into meanings of the biblical text that are obscured or ignored by other postbiblical interpreters (2003b, 43–60).

The second way can be represented by a more recent line of inquiry into the relationship between the Bible and Qurʾān: the study of the Bible in Arabic. While there are limited examples of pre-Islamic poetry, graffiti, and epigraphs, Arabic literature emerges with the Qurʾān. As Sidney Griffith notes in *The Bible in Arabic*, there is some evidence of Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians living in the mid-first millennium CE who might have translated the Bible into Arabic, but the preponderance of evidence suggests that Arabic Bible translations developed after the advent of the Qurʾān (2013, 7–15). Indeed, Hjälml argues that many Christian Arabic Bibles used deliberately qurʾānic-sounding language, even where more direct parallels to the Hebrew original were available. Hjälml's work suggests that even as the Qurʾān was influenced by the Bible, it came to influence specifically Arabic Bibles in their form and linguistic content. This, of course, is not the only interplay between Muslim, Jewish, and Christian memorial practices around the biblical past. Durmaz (2022) has noted a similar dynamic at play in the biblical and saints' lives narratives found among Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christian and Muslim communities at the end of the first millennium. Einboden (2019) has further explored the influence of Muslim scripture in select Arabic and Syriac Christian texts as well as in certain Jewish contexts. His work is particularly useful for the way it highlights the ongoing nature of the relationship between the Bible and the Qurʾān in various faith communities.

One throughline between these different approaches is the view that the Qurʾān, although distinctive in its status as scripture, nonetheless is legible as late antique scriptural interpretation not unlike patristic

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<sup>11</sup> Griffith 2007; Saleh 2008; Powers 2011.



and rabbinic literature.<sup>12</sup> Such a view undercuts nineteenth- and twentieth-century polemical arguments that the Qurʾān is an imperfect imitator of the Bible, or ontologically distinct from the New Testament and Hebrew Bible. It also offers the opportunity to consider the Qurʾān as an important witness to lines of interpretation of the biblical text that have been lost or obscured through the centuries. In each, the Qurʾān is viewed as an *inheritor* of biblical tradition, and it is in no way the point of this essay to reject such an argument. Rather, I want to take it one step further and argue that the Qurʾān helps co-produce the Bible for later generations.

Co-production is a term recently explored in work by Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg (2025). For Heyden and Nirenberg, co-production is “the ongoing dynamics of forming, re-forming, and transforming the three religions in their manifold sectarian forms through mutual interaction in thinking and (sometimes) living with each other” (2025, 166). The significance of this project lies in their emphasis on the ongoing, continual nature of co-production: the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do not become separate after some parting of the ways, but rather are always intertwined, either literally (in the case of multireligious communities) or conceptually (in the case of polemics and other discursive modes of differentiation).<sup>13</sup> Importantly for our purposes here, Heyden and Nirenberg suggest the possibility of not only diachronic studies of the religions, but anachronistic studies (e.g., putting texts or events from different contexts into conversation with one another) and even metachronic studies. Metachronism normally refers to errors in dating events, but it can also



<sup>12</sup> Some examples of scholarship that examine the interface between qurʾānic and biblical tradition include Bernstein 2009; Segovia 2015; Mann 2019.

<sup>13</sup> The “parting of the ways” has been discussed most robustly in the context of Jewish–Christian relations in the mid-first millennium, especially in Becker and Reed 2007, and responses thereto, such as Baron et al. 2018. This scholarship responds to the particular methodological issue that the division between Christianity and Judaism cannot be linked to a single moment of historical rupture. The insights of this line of inquiry are fundamental to the work of Heyden and Nirenberg but somewhat orthogonal to it, as the model of co-production is concerned with a much broader chronological and geographical scope.

refer to the impact that later events have on the perception of earlier events. Heyden and Nirenberg write:

This dia-, ana-, and meta-chronic aspect of co-production is especially difficult for us as professional historians to accept, both because it challenges our assumption that the arrow of time and of narrative flows only in one direction, and because we are trained to mine a particular context, to accumulate the artifacts of a given place and time, with the goal of determining what a given object of knowledge might have meant to specific people in a unique historical moment. Both narrative coherence and contextual interpretation are important and should not be ignored. But our concept of co-production is meant to help us perceive that, because of their interrelated prophetic claims and traditions, every moment in the history of these three religions is also inter-connected with prior moments, even if evidence for such interconnections rarely survives, or is not known to us. And similarly, every moment is potentially interconnected with later ones as well. (Heyden and Nirenberg 2025, 165)



Thinking with the intervention of Heyden and Nirenberg, it becomes clear that the vast majority of Qurʾān and Bible studies focus on the diachronic aspect of the relationship between the two—the Qurʾān is an inheritor of biblical tradition and therefore can be used as a lens to understand late antique views of the Bible. We might also see the juxtaposition and comparison of qurʾānic and biblical texts as an anachronistic study, not as an insult to that type of study but rather to underscore the creative use of temporal disjuncture to highlight the similarities and differences between the texts and their underlying logics. What seems to be the path least taken is that of the metachronic mode, studying the ways in which the Qurʾān impacted the Bible. A “common sense” approach, which understands time’s arrow moving forward, might decry such an approach as absurd, since the form of biblical texts as we have them largely stabilized well before the advent of the Qurʾān, as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, the *material* form of the Bible as it is read today (with some exceptions) is directly influenced by the Qurʾān and discourses about the Qurʾān. That material form fossilized the meaning of certain words and verses, and so this material stabilization also has effects on the interpretation of biblical texts. This

causes time's arrow to move backward, inasmuch as the horizon of what is considered biblical at all is influenced by later (qur'ānic) developments. In that sense, the Qur'ān was one factor in the production of the Bible as we know it, not just a repository of earlier tradition. In order to make this argument, I now turn to the history of the textualization of the Qur'ān.

## The Formation of the Final Form of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, according to Islamic tradition, is the collection of revelations received by Muhammad during his lifetime from God through the angel Gabriel. It is the most sacred and central text of Islam.<sup>14</sup> Some Islamic traditions say that at the time of Muhammad's death he left a complete collection of the Qur'ān, but other, more widely accepted traditions assert that all the surahs of the Qur'ān were recorded in both writing and in memory, but not in a complete and organized collection (Small 2011, 7–8). The precise date of this development remains debated.<sup>15</sup> Sunni tradition holds that 'Uthmān (d. 656 CE), the third of four Rāshidūn caliphs, gathered together a variety of traditions in order to make the Uthmānic codex.<sup>16</sup> The 'Uthmānic codex contained the consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) of the text.<sup>17</sup> The *rasm* of the text and its



<sup>14</sup> The traditional account of the revelation of the Qur'ān was written by Ibn Ishaq in his *Sirat Rasul Allah*, which has not survived in its entirety but was a source for Ibn Hisham's work *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah* and Al-Tabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings* (*Tarikh*). Another authoritative account of the revelation is Mu'mar ibn Rashid, whose *Kitab al-Maghazi* has been translated and is available in Rāshid 2015. See the discussions of this account in Donner 2012; Neuwirth 2019.

<sup>15</sup> See Donner 2007, 23–40; Neuwirth 2007, 97–114.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the differences between Shi'i and Sunni accounts of the earliest formation of the Qur'ān, and the underutilization of Shi'i sources in modern historiography, see Amir-Moezzi 2015.

<sup>17</sup> For a relatively conservative account, see Gilliot 2007, 41–58. Similar debates about the proper (consonantal) forms of a scriptural text had long simmered in Jewish and Christian discourses. The most famous example of a similar type of concern is Origen of Alexandria's *Hexapla*, wherein the exegete put parallel

standardization into a single form is usually the focus of scholarship on the historicity of the canonization of the Qurʾān. The classical narrative of the early canonization of the Qurʾān has been garnering evidence since the end of the twentieth century: the carbon dating of several qurʾānic manuscripts suggests a relatively fast, although not immediate, process of formalization.<sup>18</sup> Michael Cook writes:

By the standards of other places and times, the process by which the Koran achieved the status of a canonical text seems to have been quite unusually rapid. In part, this reflects the fact that the Muslims did not have to invent the idea of a scriptural canon for themselves. Our sources are, however, entirely persuasive in relating the speedy canonization of the Koran to the initiative of the state. There is a significant contrast here with the slow and unsteady emergence of both Biblical canons. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the process took place long after the demise of the Israelite monarchy; in the case of the New Testament, the gradual formation of the canon was already far advanced by the time the Roman state adopted Christianity. The fact that for all practical purposes we have only a single recension of the Koran is thus a remarkable testimony to the authority of the early Islamic state. (Cook 2000, 125–6)



Similarly to the Hebrew Bible, which was first recorded in just a consonantal frame, the aspect of the Qurʾān that stabilized early was the *rasm*. The *rasm* is the earliest part of the written Qurʾān, but other elements were added in the following years.

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versions of the Jewish scriptures side-by-side in order to more effectively make scriptural arguments. For more on the *Hexapla*, see Salvesen 1998.

<sup>18</sup> The most important work on the topic is by Marijn van Putten; see, for example, his 2022 monograph. Some of the earliest Qurʾān manuscripts include the Samarkand Kufic Qurʾān, the Sanaa Palimpsest, the Birmingham Qurʾān Manuscript, the Topkapi Manuscript, and the Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus. Not all scholars accept Van Putten's view of the text; Stephen Shoemaker (2022) in the third chapter of *Creating the Qurʾān* discusses the issues with the carbon-14 dating used in this type of argument. Whether or not one accepts Van Putten's argument wholesale, most scholars agree that the consonantal text stabilized before the end of the first millennium CE.



Arabic is an abjad language: long vowels and consonants are indicated in the *rasm*, but the proper pronunciation of the consonants and short vowels are not indicated by the abjad alone. This aspect of Arabic is shared with Hebrew, which also uses an abjad (rather than an alphabet) and which utilizes diacritic marks to indicate short vowels and some aspects of the pronunciation of consonants (for example, doubling). Diacritics indicate which of several possible meanings are indicated by the *rasm* and thus can be understood as both clarifying and limiting the possible meanings of the text. There are reports that diacritics were added to qur'ānic manuscripts under the fifth caliph, Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (d. 705 CE), by one of his governors, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, though Adam Bursi warns that this does not necessarily imply "the imposition of the kind of fully dotted *scriptio plena* that the historical sources suggest was al-Ḥajjāj's intended goal" (2019, 126). In other words, Ibn Marwān did not produce a form of the Qur'ān identical with the form read today, but his work marks an important moment in the incorporation of other written elements beyond the *rasm*.



The proper pronunciation of the Qur'ān is a science called *tajwīd*, which has rules for the pronunciation of its letters and the intonation of its words. This science developed in the face of divergent traditions of the pronunciation of the Qur'ān. Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām al-Khurāsānī al-Harawī (c. 770–883 CE) attests to some twenty-five different readers who offered distinct recitations (*qirā'āt*; sing., *qirā'ah*) of the Qur'ān (Weipert 2008). He was the first to standardize the science of *tajwīd*. Roughly a generation later, seven of the *qirā'āt* described by Abū 'Ubayd were canonized as authoritative by the philologist Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 936 CE) in his *Kitāb al-sab'a fī l-qirā'āt*. Ibn Mujāhid wrote on lexicography, qur'ānic sciences, hadith, and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). These seven *qirā'āt*, with their associated *tajwīd*, are upheld as equally valid reading and reciting traditions. According to the later writer Ibn al-Jazarī (1350–1429 CE), the authoritative *qirā'āt* are defined by their conformity to the consonantal skeleton of the Uthmānic codex, their conformity to Arabic grammar, and their authentic chain of transmission; he famously argued for an additional three valid *qirā'ah* traditions.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For Ibn Mujāhid, see Nasser 2008a; for Ibn al-Jazarī, see Nasser 2008b.

Al-Jazarī’s argument for the validity of the extra three traditions is, somewhat counterintuitively, evidence that the overwhelming tendency of this complex history is one of “pruning” or simplification. Alternate reading possibilities are ruled out by the authorization of select figures. There is not a single authoritative reading tradition, but these sources and traditions suggest an increasing tendency and interest in the disambiguation of qurʾānic pronunciation in the first few centuries after the death of Muhammad. In many ways, although on a compressed timeline, this process mirrors the incorporation of *matres lectiones* into consonantal Hebrew and select diacritic marks seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls before the development of *niqqudot* in later centuries.

Here, I have highlighted a post-qurʾānic impulse in the eighth and ninth centuries CE to standardize *tajwīd*, as seen in the writing of Abū ‘Ubayd, followed by the impulse to delimit the number of acceptable readings and canonize a small selection a generation or so later, as seen in the writing of Ibn Mujāhid (d. 930 CE).<sup>20</sup> These discursive developments cannot be separated from the increasing concern for canonicity and unambiguous scriptural authority among Muslims,<sup>21</sup> nor from the flourishing book culture that developed in the Islamicate world, especially in the Abbasid caliphate, from the mid-eighth to the late tenth century CE.<sup>22</sup> In this context, scribal cultures flourished, including non-Muslim scribal groups like the Masoretes.



## The Masoretic Text

“Masorete” is the term used to identify a widespread group of Jewish scribes who lived in Palestine and Babylonia throughout the early

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<sup>20</sup> The canonization of the Qurʾān was a complex process. It is discussed well in Dye 2015; Nasser 2020; Déroche 2022. Nasser’s scheme of five canonizations of the Qurʾān, reflecting the shifts in the material record of the text from the seventh through the twentieth century, is particularly persuasive for its account of shifts in perceptions of the text into the modern period (2020, 6–8).

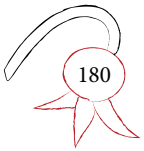
<sup>21</sup> See the discussion in Small 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent overview, see Gruendler 2020.



medieval period. The earliest history of the Masoretes is obscure. The Masoretes were not a singular group: there were Masoretes in Babylonia, others around Jerusalem, and still others based in Tiberias in the Galilee. Geoffrey Khan, one of the most important historians of the Masoretic Text, writes that the Tiberian Masoretic tradition

gradually took shape over two or three centuries and continued to grow until it was finally fixed, and the activities of the Masoretes ceased, at the beginning of the second millennium. During the same period, circles of Masoretes are known to have existed also in Iraq. It is the tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes, however, that had become virtually the exclusive Masoretic tradition in Judaism by the late Middle Ages and has been followed by all printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. (Khan 2020b, 16)<sup>23</sup>



The Tiberian *niqqud* (system of diacritic marks) came to be hegemonic, but it developed alongside Palestinian and Babylonian systems that were eventually discarded.<sup>24</sup> The varieties of pointed Hebrew were based on long-standing oral traditions. In their essay on Hebrew philology, Khan et al. (2020) contend that the pointing system is the textualization of centuries-old pronunciation traditions. There is evidence that this pronunciation system existed among other pronunciation systems. The pronunciation of the text was not a late antique or early medieval development, but the textualization of these oral traditions certainly was an early medieval development. Khan notes that this tradition “was no doubt stimulated by a general increasing shift from oral to written transmission of knowledge in the early Islamic period” (2020b, 12).

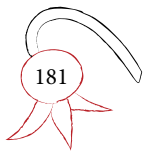
David Stern (2017), in his study of the material form of the Hebrew Bible, cautions that the parallel qur’ānic grammatical discourses cannot explain the Masoretic tradition in its entirety, and indeed it cannot,

<sup>23</sup> For more introductory material on the Masoretic tradition, see Goshen-Gottstein 1960; Ginsburg 1966 (1897); 1974; Dotan 1977; Revell 1977; Sáenz-Badillos 1993; Khan 2017.

<sup>24</sup> The Ben Asher family, which was a family of Masoretes, is credited with producing the authoritative version of the Masoretic Text. There was an alternative form of the text produced by the Ben Naphtali Masoretes, but Maimonides in particular declared the Ben Asher edition to be superior. See Khan 2020b, 25.

but neither should that parallel social context be underplayed. Khan notes that the term for a Bible codex used in the Middle Ages was *מצחף* (*miṣḥaf*), which is an Arabic loanword (from *muṣḥaf*).<sup>25</sup> The use of this Arabic term reflects the novel development of a Hebrew Bible being placed in a codex rather than a scroll. Stern notes that the evidence of early Jewish biblical codices suggests that the tradition began in the early eighth century, which is also when the earliest extant Jewish codices are found (2008, 163–202). Khan argues that it was only in the framework of a codex (rather than the scroll, which was liturgically significant and had a centuries-long history undergirding it) that the Masoretes had the freedom to change the text by adding diacritic marks. He writes:

The desire to commit to writing in the Middle Ages many components of the Masoretic tradition that had been previously transmitted orally was, no doubt, one of the main motivations for the adoption of the codex at this period. ... The earliest extant datable codices of the Qurʾān pre-date the dated codices of the Hebrew Bible by about two centuries. The fact that one of the medieval Hebrew terms for Bible codex, *miṣḥaf*, is a loanword from Arabic (*muṣḥaf*) suggests, indeed, that the Jews borrowed the format from the Muslims. (Khan 2020b, 19)



Khan presents this information in several of his works on the Masoretic Text and uses it to explain the relatively late date of the Masoretic evidence and tradition. He underscores in his work the connections between the Masoretes and earlier Jewish tradents and the stability of the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>26</sup> These connections are significant, but so are the differences: Stern's work suggests that the Masoretes represent a fairly radical shift in Jewish engagement with biblical texts, one that he characterizes as a change to a visual, reading-oriented

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<sup>25</sup> The Arabic term is a loanword from Gēez, and so its adoption into Hebrew speaks to the intimate entanglements—what Heyden and Nirenberg (2025) would call the “co-production”—of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

<sup>26</sup> The continuity between the Masoretic tradition and earlier tradition is particularly emphasized in Khan et al. 2020.

culture, rather than the oral, recitation-oriented practices used by rabbis and other Jews of antiquity (2008, 163–202).<sup>27</sup>

One of my central questions in this essay is: what happens when we shift the emphasis of the research of Khan and Stern, and center the fact that both the *niqqud* and the codex form of the Hebrew Bible are developments from after the rise of Islam that were influenced by contemporary Muslim culture and represent a marked shift from earlier Jewish engagement with the Bible? On first glance, these facts do not seem to change much: the consonantal form of the Hebrew Bible had stabilized much earlier, and the Qurʾān does not change the semantic content of the texts included in the text. The early medieval work of the Masoretes seemingly matters very little to the experience of people who read the Bible in translation, or to those reading Hebrew from a scroll in a liturgical context. But reading the Masoretic tradition in light of the Qurʾān’s textualization reminds us that the Masoretic reading tradition fossilizes certain textual possibilities and precludes others. The pronunciation of liturgical scrolls is understood by reference to the Masoretic Text, and those who read the Bible in translation are (usually) reading a translation based on the Masoretic Text: the realm of reading possibilities in both cases, which seems to resist the importance of the Qurʾān and the Masoretic turn, reflects reading possibilities heavily influenced by the Masoretic Text.

Perhaps more significant is the work developed by historians of the book, who have long pointed to the ways in which the material form of a text shapes the experience of reading and engaging with the text.<sup>28</sup> As Stern puts it: “We do not read ‘texts.’ What we read are texts

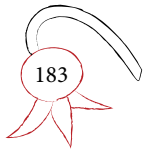


<sup>27</sup> See 176: “My intention is ... to stress the newness of what the Masoretes are doing. Yes, they are codifying the reading tradition and its practice, but they are also *reading* the biblical text, and reading it in a new way that has no precedent in Jewish culture.” For more on the distinctiveness of rabbinic reading practices and theorization of the written biblical text, see Wollenberg 2023.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Chartier 1992. With respect to the Hebrew Bible, Breed 2014 and Stern 2017 offer the most cogent discussion of the effects of the material form of the text. More work has been done on the material form and reception of para-biblical texts (e.g., Lied and Lundhaug 2017; Lied 2021) and the New Testament (e.g., Knust and Wasserman 2019).

that have been inscribed upon some type of writing material in a particular fashion” (2017, 4). Students of Biblical Hebrew learn using the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, a codicological form of the text that uses Masoretic Tiberian *niqqudot*.

The previous pages have argued that the Islamic culture of the last few centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era saw a state-sponsored effort to textualize an earlier oral tradition of scripture in the Qurʾān, especially via the incorporation of diacritic marks and the development of the science of *tajwīd*. In conjunction with this evidence, I have shown that Jewish scribes living under Islamic rule in the same centuries textualized the Hebrew Bible in new ways, both in placing the Hebrew Bible into a codex and incorporating diacritic marks into the text, including *niqqudot*. These parallel developments are not an accident. The inclusion of diacritic marks in both scriptures indicates a concern for a standardized oral pronunciation of readings across far-flung communities that both underscores the importance of the spoken word and a certain amount of anxiety about a potential incommensurability between what is written and what is read aloud. These changes speak to the deeply intertwined histories of the Qurʾān and the Hebrew Bible, where the Qurʾān makes reference to and rewrites parts of the Hebrew Bible as its inheritance and where, in turn, new aspects of the material form of the Hebrew Bible are shaped by contemporaneous Muslim discourses.



## Conclusion

By first examining the contemporary landscape of Qurʾān–Bible studies and a temporal framework that distinguishes between diachronic, anachronistic, and metachronistic studies before turning to recent studies on the textualization of the Qurʾān and the Masoretic Text, this article has made a case that the Qurʾān influenced the Bible. The form of the Hebrew Bible that is most commonly utilized today outside of Jewish liturgical settings is a reflection of an early Islamic milieu and the qurʾānic discourses thereof, in which the material form of the Bible

developed.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the material experience of modern readers of the Bible in Hebrew is directly influenced by the Qurʾān. Rather than an offshoot of biblical history, the Qurʾān is an integral element to the form of the text as we now have it.

Scholars have long argued for the relevance of multiple later cultural spheres for understanding the Bible: as just one example, the Protestant Reformation, with its intense debates about the status of deuterocanonical texts, has become an important site of reflection in modern scholarship about the canon of the Bible.<sup>30</sup> The Qurʾān is an example of the influence of biblical tradition and an influence on the Bible. Though there are multiple ways one might understand the relevance of the Qurʾān to the Bible, this essay makes the argument that insights from the adjacent fields of qurʾānic studies and medieval Jewish codicology should shape how we understand the relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible. The physical form of the Hebrew Bible as it is most often read today is one that is indelibly marked by the Masoretic impulse to write in books and include diacritical information which emerged in an Islamic context and in the midst of contemporaneous discourses about the proper textualization and pronunciation of the Qurʾān. The two scriptures as we know them in the modern world are co-produced by their intertwined histories.

The histories of the two scriptures are not the same. The Tiberian pointing system eventually became singularly hegemonic, unlike the qurʾānic *qirāʾāt*, which always existed in multiplicity. In tracing the history of both, however, it is possible to see parallel increasing tendencies toward textualization, stabilization, and the “pruning” of other systems of pronunciation. This account should not radically shift anyone’s sense



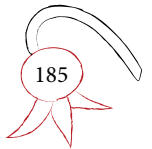
<sup>29</sup> This argument does not even consider the ways in which the Masoretic interpretation of biblical tradition may have affected perceptions of the semantic content of the Bible. This topic has been explored in Weitzman 1999 and in Patmore 2008.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Gordon and McLean 2012, which discusses the material form of the Bible as shaped by early modern practices. See also Bakker et al. 2022 on the ways in which nineteenth-century and subsequent historical critical scholarship shaped Protestant assumptions about and attitudes toward Jews.

of the origins of the Bible, but Edward Said (1985) taught that there are multiple possible *beginnings* to any historical narrative. Attention to the beginning of the Masoretic Text of the Bible, as a scribal movement embedded in the Islamicate world and post-qurʾānic discourses, reveals one way in which later events—those pertaining to the development of the Qurʾān—affected perceptions of an object—the Bible—from a much earlier period.

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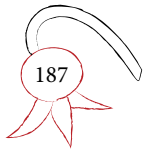


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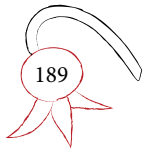
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